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*Article*

# The Impact of Cyberbullying via Social Media on Mental Concentration and Skill Performance of Football Players in the Iraq Stars League

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**Abstract:** Objective: The current study aimed to investigate the impact of cyberbullying via social media on the level of mental concentration and the accuracy of skill performance among football players in the "Iraq Stars League". Methodology: A descriptive (analytical and correlational) approach was used on a stratified random sample of (n=240) players from professional league clubs. Measurement tools included a cyberbullying scale, a mental concentration scale, and a skill performance evaluation card; statistical processing was conducted using (Pearson, Regression, ANOVA, T-test). Results: The results showed that players are exposed to high levels of cyberbullying (Mean = 3.82). Correlation analysis revealed a strong, statistically significant inverse relationship between cyberbullying and both mental concentration (r = -0.74) and skill performance (r = -0.68). Regression results indicated that cyberbullying explains (54.7%) of the variance in mental concentration, and (46.2%) in skill performance. The results also proved the existence of statistically significant differences in the vulnerability to bullying attributed to the age variable (in favor of the < 25 years category) and playing position; where goalkeepers and attackers were the categories most negatively affected by digital pressures. Conclusions: It was concluded that cyberbullying represents a "critical variable" leading to attention distraction and the deterioration of technical outputs in Iraqi stadiums, especially among young players and sensitive offensive and defensive positions. The study recommends the necessity of adopting "digital immunity" strategies and activating the role of the sports psychological preparer within clubs to deal with the repercussions of the digital environment.

**Keywords:** Cyberbullying, Iraq Stars League, Mental Concentration, Skill Performance, Football, Sports Psychology.

## 1. Introduction

The past decade has seen a radical shift in the nature of sports communication as a result of the massive technological boom and the emergence of social media as a key platform for interaction between fans and athletes. Despite the communicative benefits of these platforms, they have produced complex negative phenomena, including "cyberbullying", which has become a primary threat to the mental health and professional stability of elite athletes [1]. Global studies confirm that the digital environment, due to its instantaneous interactive nature, has become an additional source of psychological stress beyond the boundaries of the stadiums to reach the private lives of players, directly affecting their cognitive processes [2]. Furthermore, modern sports literature indicates that mental concentration is the fundamental pillar upon which a football player relies to

execute tactical and skill duties with high efficiency. With the escalation of online abuse, players face what is known as "digital attention distraction"; where a study [3] proved that exposure to negative comments prior to sports competitions leads to increased levels of cognitive anxiety, which reflects negatively on motor coordination and accuracy in skill performance. On the other hand, whereas fan pressure was previously limited to match time, social media has made the player vulnerable to scathing criticism and verbal harassment around the clock, creating an environment of continuous psychological pressure [4].

However, despite the abundance of research dealing with cyberbullying in educational and social environments, it still lacks, in the sports field, rigorous scientific studies linking exposure to cyberbullying and direct field variables such as the skill performance of high-level players. The importance of the study is highlighted at the present time in conjunction with the matches of the "Iraq Stars League," and the accompanying media momentum and broad fan interaction via digital platforms, which puts the players of Iraqi clubs in direct confrontation with varying reactions that may reach the point of bullying.

**Research Gap:**

Upon reviewing previous studies, the researcher found that most of the focus was on the general psychological impacts of bullying (such as depression and isolation), without delving into how this digital bullying affects the "quality of skill execution" in a highly intense competitive environment such as a professional football league. Therefore, the current research seeks to bridge this gap by linking the digital behavior of the fans to the mental skills and outcomes of the Iraqi player, which has not been addressed within the limits of the researcher's knowledge according to the context of the local sports environment.

Based on the foregoing, the research problem crystallizes in answering the following main question: "What is the impact of cyberbullying via social media on the level of mental concentration and the efficiency of skill performance among football players in the Iraq Stars League?"

**Research Objectives and Significance:**

The importance of this study lies in its being one of the first studies to shed light on technological variables and their impact in Iraqi stadiums, providing coaches, administrators, and the Iraq Football Association with a scientific database that helps in developing strategies to mentally protect players.

Accordingly, the current research aims to investigate the nature of the relationship and the impact of cyberbullying via social media on the levels of mental concentration and the accuracy of skill performance among the players of the Iraq Stars League, in pursuit of presenting a scientific vision that contributes to the development of sports performance from a contemporary psycho-technical perspective.

**Operational Definitions**

1. **Cyberbullying:** Operationally defined in this study as: "The exposure of Iraq Stars League players to various forms of intentional abuse, defamation, threat, or mockery via social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok), measured by the total score the player obtains on the cyberbullying scale used in this research".
2. **Mental Concentration:** Operationally defined as: "The ability of the football player in the Iraq Stars League to direct his attention towards stimuli related to the match and block distractors resulting from digital pressures, with its score determined through the response to the items of the mental concentration scale (prepared according to the Nideffer model [5]) used in this study".
3. **Skill Performance:** Operationally defined as: "The level of efficiency and quality in executing the basic skills of football (such as passing, shooting, moving, and decision-

making) during official matches, measured by the average score the player receives through his self-evaluation and the evaluation of his assistant coach in the skill performance observation card dedicated to the research".

## 2. Method and Field Procedures

### 1. Research Design

The current study relied on the descriptive (analytical and correlational) approach; due to its suitability to the nature of the problem, which seeks to describe the phenomenon of cyberbullying and analyze the effect relationship between it and mental and skill variables. The choice of this approach allows the researcher to monitor the phenomenon as it is in reality without intervening in its course, and then analyze the statistical correlations between the independent variable (cyberbullying) and the dependent variables (mental concentration and skill performance) [6].

### 2. Participants

The research population consisted of the players of the "Iraq Stars League" football clubs for the (2025-2026) football season, numbering (20) clubs, with an approximate total of up to (500) officially registered players. A stratified random sample was selected to ensure that all clubs were represented. According to the tables in [7] to determine the sample size, the target size reached (240) players. The Stars League players were chosen precisely because they represent the main professional front in Iraq, and they are the most vulnerable to intense interaction from fans and digital pressure via social media, making them the most suitable sample to measure the impact of cyberbullying. The sample included several age groups (< 25, 25-30 > 30 years) and different playing positions (goalkeeper, defender, midfielder, attacker) to ensure the accuracy of statistical comparisons. Prior approval was obtained from the club's management, with the participants being assured that the data would remain confidential and would only be used for scientific research purposes, giving them complete freedom to withdraw at any time.

### 3. Study Tools

- Due to the nature of the variables, a three-axis composite measurement instrument was used (see Appendix A):
- **Cyberbullying Scale:** The [8] scale has been adopted and modified for the Iraqi sports environment, and it consists of (10) elements distributed over the dimensions of (digital harassment, defamation and exclusion).
- **Mental Focus Scale:** A scale prepared according to the Needfer model [5], consisting of (8) objects that measure a player's ability to direct attention and block distractions.
- **Skill Performance Scorecard:** Depends on the player's self-assessment and the assistant coach's assessment (self-training assessment scale) to ensure objectivity, and covers (8) basic skills (passing, accuracy, decision making under pressure).
- **Rating Scale:** A 5-point Likert Scale was used: (Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly Disagree).

### 4. Psychometric Properties (Validity & Reliability)

To ensure the robustness of the tool, the following was conducted:

- **Face Validity:** The tool was presented to a group of experts (10 arbitrators) in the field of sports and sports psychology to ensure the appropriateness of the items.
- **Construct Validity:** The "Pearson" correlation coefficient was calculated between the score of each item and the total score of the axis, and the results showed strong and statistically significant correlations at the (0.01) level.
- **Reliability:** Reliability was calculated using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient, and the reliability values reached (0.88) for bullying, (0.84) for concentration, and (0.81) for

performance, which are values reflecting high reliability of the tools. The table below illustrates the reliability values:

**Table 1.** Reliability values (Cronbach's Alpha) for the measurement tools in the study.

| Axis | Number of Items (Average) | Cronbach's Alpha Value | Evaluation |
|---|---|---|---|
| Cyberbullying | 10 | 0.88 | Very High |
| Mental Concentration | 8 | 0.84 | High |
| Skill Performance | 8 | 0.81 | High |

**5. Pilot Study**

A pilot study was conducted on a sample outside the main study sample consisting of (20) players from first-division clubs, in order to verify the clarity of the instructions and items, and to calculate the time taken to respond, and the experiment proved that there was no ambiguity in the formulation of the tool [9], [10].

**6. Field Study Procedures**

The study commenced its field procedures by obtaining all administrative and official approvals from the Iraq Football Association and the administrations of the clubs participating in the "Iraq Stars League," to ensure the facilitation of the researcher's and the assisting teamwork's mission in accessing the research sample in training grounds and official competitions. Concurrently, orientation sessions were held for the assisting teamwork consisting of sports psychology specialists and assistant coaches, to train them on the mechanism of applying the tools and clarifying the technical terms contained in the scales, to ensure the unification of the language of guidance and reduce bias in responses.

In terms of the application of psychometric tools, the data collection process was conducted in a calm training environment well before the night sessions, where the balance (cyberbullying) and (mental focus) were distributed to the players with a full explanation of the need to respond based on their real experiences across digital platforms during the current competitive season. The researcher was keen to reassure the players about the confidentiality of their personal data, stressing that this information will not be consulted by the club's administrations or technical staff, but will be used exclusively for scientific research purposes, and this path lasted for eight weeks to ensure full access to all the sample clubs.

In parallel with the psychological aspects, skill performance evaluation procedures were implemented during official matches within the league competitions, in order to monitor the accuracy of basic skills in a real competitive environment under the weight of fan pressure. The researcher adopted a "dual evaluation" method to ensure objectivity; where each player self-evaluated his performance immediately after the end of the match, while the assistant coach evaluated the performance of the same player through the observation card designated for that, and then the arithmetic mean of the two evaluations was extracted to represent the final score for skill performance.

The field procedures concluded with the review and auditing process of the retrieved forms, where incomplete questionnaires were excluded and the correspondence of the psychological data with the technical performance cards of each player was verified before starting the statistical coding process and entering the data into the (SPSS v.26) program to reach the final results.

**7. Statistical Processing**

To achieve the objectives of the study, the statistical program (SPSS v.26) was used to conduct the following tests [11], [12], [13], [14]:

- Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test
- Descriptive Statistics: (Arithmetic Means, Standard Deviations, Percentages).
- Pearson Correlation Coefficient
- Linear Regression Analysis
- T-test and One-Way ANOVA

## 3. Results

This section presents and analyzes the statistical data processed via the SPSS v.26 program, in order to test the research hypotheses related to the impact of cyberbullying on the mental and skill processes of the Iraq Stars League players.

### 1. Description of the Study Sample

The opinions of a sample consisting of (n=240) professional players were surveyed.

Table 2 illustrates the distribution of the sample according to the basic demographic variables.

**Table 2.** Distribution of the study sample according to demographic variables (n=240).

| Variable | Category | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|
| Age | Less than 25 years | 102 | 42.5% |
| | 25 - 30 years | 98 | 40.8% |
| | More than 30 years | 40 | 16.7% |
| Playing Position | Goalkeeper | 45 | 18.7% |
| | Defense | 100 | 41.6% |
| | Midfield | 55 | 22.9% |
| | Attack | 40 | 16.6% |
| Years of Experience | Less than 5 years | 115 | 47.9% |
| | 5 years or more | 125 | 52.1% |

### 2. Normality of Distribution

The (Kolmogorov-Smirnov) test showed that the statistical significance values (Sig.) for all variables were greater than (0.05), indicating that the data follows a normal distribution, which justifies the use of Parametric Tests in subsequent analyses.

### 3.Descriptive Analysis of Variables and Dimensions

Table (3) illustrates the levels of exposure to cyberbullying (with its sub-dimensions) and the levels of mental concentration and skill performance.

**Table 3.** Arithmetic means and ranks for the dimensions of the variables.

| Variable / Dimension | Arithmetic Mean | Standard Deviation | Level | Rank |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Cyberbullying (Total) | 3.82 | 0.65 | High | - |
| * Digital Harassment Dimension | 4.12 | 0.52 | Very High | 1 |
| * Digital Defamation Dimension | 3.75 | 0.68 | High | 2 |
| * Private Threats Dimension | 3.59 | 0.71 | Medium | 3 |
| Mental Concentration | 2.45 | 0.58 | Low | - |
| Skill Performance | 2.80 | 0.72 | Medium | - |

**4. Correlation Matrix (Correlation Analysis)**

The "Pearson" correlation coefficient was used to determine the nature of the relationship between the variables.

**Table 4.** Correlation matrix between cyberbullying and dependent variables.

| Variables | Cyberbullying | Mental Concentration | Skill Performance |
|---|---|---|---|
| Cyberbullying | 1 | -0.74** | -0.68** |
| Mental Concentration | -0.74** | 1 | 0.82** |
| Skill Performance | -0.68** | 0.82** | 1 |

(**) Statistically significant at the significance level of (P = 0.01).

**5. Regression Analysis**

To measure the predictive ability of cyberbullying, the regression analysis showed the results illustrated in Table 5.

**Table 5.** Model of the impact of cyberbullying on the dependent variables.

| Dependent Variable | Coefficient of Determination ($R^2$) | (F) Value | Significance Level (Sig.) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Mental Concentration | 0.547 | 288.42 | 0.000 |
| Skill Performance | 0.462 | 204.15 | 0.000 |

Cyberbullying contributes to explaining (54.7%) of the variance in mental concentration, and (46.2%) of the variance in skill performance.

**6. Differences According to Demographic Variables**

Comparison tests (t-test) and ANOVA were conducted to detect differences in vulnerability to bullying.

**Table 6.** One-Way ANOVA for differences in vulnerability to bullying according to the age variable.

| Age Category | Number (n) | Arithmetic Mean (M) | Standard Deviation (SD) | Calculated (F) Value | Significance Level (Sig.) | Result |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Less than 25 years | 102 | 4.20 | 0.50 | 57.78 | 0.000 | Statistically Significant |
| 25 - 30 years | 98 | 3.65 | 0.58 | | | |
| More than 30 years | 40 | 3.10 | 0.72 | | | |

The results showed the existence of substantial differences attributed to the age variable, where the category of less than 25 years was the most affected by cyberbullying. This result reflects that young players are the most connected to social media and the least able to isolate themselves from digital pressures. The results indicate that older players

(over 30) possess "cumulative experience" that helps them ignore digital abuse and maintain their emotional stability.

**Table 7.** One-Way ANOVA for differences in vulnerability to bullying according to the playing position variable.

| Playing Position | Number (n) | Arithmetic Mean (M) | Standard Deviation (SD) | Calculated (F) Value | Significance Level (Sig.) | Result |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Goalkeeper | 45 | 4.15 | 0.48 | 8.69 | 0.000 | Statistically |
| Defense | 100 | 3.65 | 0.65 | | | Significant |
| Midfield | 55 | 3.70 | 0.60 | | | |
| Attack | 40 | 3.95 | 0.55 | | | |

**Table 8.** Results of the (T-test) for differences in vulnerability to bullying according to the years of experience variable.

| Experience Category | Number (n) | Arithmetic Mean (M) | Standard Deviation (SD) | (t) Value | Significance Level (Sig.) | Result |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Less than 5 years | 115 | 4.15 | 0.62 | 9.89 | 0.000 | Statistically Significant |
| 5 years or more | 125 | 3.32 | 0.68 | | | |

The results indicate the existence of statistically significant differences in favor of the "less experienced" players, which means that they are the most negatively affected by cyberbullying compared to their peers with extensive experience.

## 4. Discussion

### Theoretical Explanation for the Impact of Cyberbullying on Mental Processes

The results showed that cyberbullying explained (54.7%) the variation in mental focus. This finding suggests that digital stress is no longer just an external, but has become a fundamental "cognitive distraction". This result agrees with the "Cognitive Interference Theory" of [15]; where thinking about abusive comments consumes working memory resources, which reduces the player's efficiency in processing field information quickly. Furthermore, the high levels of digital harassment (4.12) reinforce the phenomenon of "self-preoccupation". The study by [16] supports this proposition, affirming that athletes exposed to scathing criticism via "Twitter" and "Instagram" suffer from voluntary attention distraction, which explains the low level of concentration in our study (2.45). Also, [17] argues that negative self-talk resulting from external bullying leads to a defect in "attention allocation," which makes the Iraqi player unable to isolate the noise of the platforms from the sound of the pitch.

### The Relationship Between Digital Pressure and the Deterioration of Skill Performance

The study revealed a profound impact of bullying on skill performance at a rate of (46.2%). This can be explained through the "Self-Consciousness Hypothesis"; the attacker or defender who is exposed to bullying tends to monitor their skill movements with excessive consciousness for fear of making a mistake, leading to a "breakdown of automaticity" in performance [18]. This result is consistent with the study by [19], which

found that the "fear of negative evaluation" is the primary driver of the "choking under pressure" phenomenon. The Iraqi Stars League player, due to the momentum of the media, has become showing his skills as if he is under a continuous "digital microscope", which weakens his neuromuscular coordination. In addition, [20] the study supports our findings, asserting that cyberbullying leads to a decrease in "perceived self-efficacy", which is the primary driver of high skill performance. This change in "neuromuscular coordination" is what explains why players make minor skill mistakes under digital pressure. This discovery is in line with the hypothesis [1] that social media has become "virtual stadiums" where the impact of defeat is the same as in real stadiums.

**Discussion of differences by position of play (goalkeeper and attack)**

The discovery that goalkeepers and forwards are more affected than defenders and midfielders is a qualitative scientific contribution. Goalkeepers: [21] This is explained by the fact that the goalkeeper occupies a "high-risk" position; a single technical error becomes valuable material for "memes" and digital satire, creating a unique psychological stress called the "virtual concierge unit". Similarly, the goalkeeper is the "last line of defense", and any mistake he makes immediately turns into a goal, making him an easy scapegoat for the angry digital audience. This "zero reaction" pressure puts goalkeepers under the microscope of constant harassment, raising their anxiety level and affecting their speed of reaction and decision-making.

The attackers, on the other hand, are under the weight of "high expectations". In the professional league, a striker is always expected to get matches, and in the absence of goals, digital admiration turns into severe harassment and intense defamation. This pressure puts the striker in a state of "assessment anxiety", causing him to lose his accuracy in finishing attacks due to the mental distraction between the pitch and the expected reactions of the crowd. [22] He argues that attackers live under "hostages to the result"; the digital audience in Iraq associates the value of the attacker only with the number of goals, making them vulnerable to "goal cancellation harassment" when they are not scoring, affecting their peace of mind when finishing attacks. This finding is consistent with a study [2] that found that attackers' "digital fame" makes them prime targets for hate campaigns when they lose.

**Age and experience as moderate factors**

The results showed that young players (under the age of 25) were the most affected. The researcher attributes this to the "digital psychological fragility" of the new generation. [23] The study confirms that elite young athletes have a stronger identity attachment to social media platforms, which makes them gain self-esteem from likes, and when these likes turn into bullying, a rapid breakdown of emotional stability occurs. In contrast, experienced players (over 30 years) possess what is called "adaptive psychological resilience," where [24] supports this perspective, explaining that extensive field experience helps develop strategies of "selective ignoring" of negative external stimuli [25][26].

In comparison with previous studies, these results agree with the study by [3], which confirmed that the use of social media prior to competitions is associated with increased cognitive anxiety and declined performance accuracy. However, the current study is unique (In contrast) in that it revealed a larger effect size in the Iraqi environment, and this may be attributed to the emotional nature and the close connection between the fans and the clubs in Iraq, making the impact of bullying more severe compared to other professional environments that may possess advanced psychological protection programs for players.

This study adds an explanatory model linking "digital behavior" and "skill outcomes". While traditional theories such as (Nideffer's view of concentration) [5] focused on distractors inside the stadium, our results prove that "cyber" distractors (outside the stadium) possess a destructive capacity parallel or superior to technical performance, which redefines the concept of the "training environment" to include the digital sphere as

well. This discussion establishes the necessity of redefining "psychological training" to include training on "digital attention management".

## 5. Conclusion

In light of the statistical results and analytical discussion, the study reached the following conclusions:

1. Iraq Stars League players face high levels of cyberbullying, mostly concentrated in "public digital harassment" (comments), making the virtual environment a constant source of psychological pressure.
2. A strong inverse correlational relationship was proven to exist between exposure to bullying and the deterioration of both mental concentration and skill performance; where bullying acts as a "cognitive interference" that disrupts the fluidity of motor performance.
4. Cyberbullying possesses high predictive ability; as it explains more than half of the variance occurring in players' attention distraction, and nearly half of the decline in their quality of executing basic skills.
5. It was concluded that goalkeepers and strikers are the groups most vulnerable to the negative impact of bullying, given the "decisive" nature of their situations, which puts them under the magnifying lens of intense public criticism in the face of any failure.
6. The results showed that young players (under the age of 25) and less experienced players lack adequate strategies to deal with them, making them "digitally fragile" compared to players with extensive experience.

**Recommendations**

Based on the previous conclusions, the researcher recommends the following:

1. The need for Iraqi Stars League clubs to design "specialized" psychological counseling programs targeting goalkeepers and strikers, to improve their emotional stability in the face of digital pressures.
2. Forcing clubs to organize "digital immunity" courses for young young players, to train them on how to isolate on-pitch performance from the effects of social media.
3. Calling upon the Iraq Football Association to enact regulations that protect players from systematic bullying, and to cooperate with security authorities to activate anti-cybercrime laws in the sports community.
4. Recommending technical staffs to impose a "temporary digital isolation" (Digital Detox) on players 48 hours before important matches, to ensure the highest levels of mental concentration.
5. Activating the role of the sports psychological preparer to act as a "monitor" of the players' digital interactions, and to provide immediate support to those exposed to severe bullying campaigns.

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